



# Responsibility attribution in coalition governments: Evidence from Germany



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 21 November 2015

Received in revised form

31 May 2016

Accepted 9 June 2016

Available online 11 June 2016

### Keywords:

Responsibility attribution

Coalition government

Partisan performance ratings

Policy importance

Voter perceptions

## ABSTRACT

Models of coalition governance suggest that political parties pursue the interests of their electorate through the ministerial control of policy in their portfolios. Yet, little is known whether voters reward or punish coalition parties for policy performance in their portfolios. This study investigates voters' evaluations of the policy priorities of coalition parties and their responsibility attribution in twenty policy areas using survey data from Germany. Specifically, we investigate whether voters attribute policy responsibility equally across coalition parties, along the jurisdictional lines of ministerial portfolios, or to the dominant party in the coalition. Our findings suggest that party size, prime minister status, and ministerial portfolios are decisive for responsibility attribution.

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## 1. Introduction

Electoral accountability in parliamentary democracies is contingent on the ability of voters to identify a responsible actor. There is ample evidence that electoral accountability is weaker, and even jeopardized, in democracies with institutions that blur the lines of responsibility (Powell and Whitten, 1993). Multiparty democracies represent such a setting due to the occurrence of coalition governments (Narud and Valen, 2008). When many parties govern together, which of these do voters end up holding responsible? The literature on coalition policy-making and voter perceptions of coalitions proposes different answers. In the most simple world with low levels of political sophistication (Downs, 1957) voters only have a basic understanding of coalition governance. While voters often realize that coalition governments include many parties, they may lack any further information about governmental organization and therefore do not discriminate between government parties when assessing their performance. Other scholars have emphasized the structural features of coalition governments whereby parties are interested in holding ministerial offices for

policy purposes. This perspective assumes that voters do have a higher level of political sophistication and recognize the proposal power of ministerial office-holders in coalition policy decisions. In other words, voters are able to apply a ministerial autonomy-perspective and are expected to hold coalition parties responsible, but only for the policy areas under their ministerial control (Laver and Shepsle, 1992, 1996; Austen-Smith and Banks, 1990). Finally, several scholars emphasize the importance of party asymmetry and prime ministerial prerogatives for shaping final coalition policy decisions (Martin and Vanberg, 2011, 2014; Huber, 1996; Saiegh, 2009). As a result, one may expect that voters heuristically assign responsibility predominantly to the largest party holding the prime minister position in the coalition.

This study examines these propositions using survey data on voters' evaluations of the policy priorities of coalition parties in twenty policy areas in Germany, a country with a long tradition of coalition governments and strong parliamentary institutions. We uncover responsibility attribution patterns from the relationship between voters' satisfaction with the policy-specific priorities and perceived performance ratings of coalition parties and argue that the strength of this relationship reveals the magnitude of attributed responsibility. Our results reveal that coalition parties do not share equal responsibility for their coalition policy decisions. We find strong support for a large party (or prime ministerial dominance)

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conjecture. However, we find this effect only for the policy areas under the ministerial control of the largest coalition party. Perceived priorities across the policy areas managed by the junior coalition partner appear irrelevant for the performance evaluation of coalition partners, despite the fact that these policy areas are highly important to voters. These results suggest that, while both coalition partners are held responsible, the larger coalition party with the prime minister carries the largest responsibility burden, but possibly receives also the largest rewards for positive performance evaluations. Voters discount (or act as if they do so) the importance of ministerial proposal power in shaping coalition government outcomes for junior coalition partners. Overall, our findings suggest that both, party size (or prime ministerial dominance) and ministerial proposal power are essential for policy responsibility attribution.

Our study proceeds as follows. We discuss the state of the literature on responsibility attribution in coalitions, paying close attention to recent experimental work in this area. The theoretical section presents three competing perspectives of coalition governance and voters' perceptions thereof (low sophistication, ministerial autonomy, and large party dominance) from which we derive our hypotheses about expected responsibility attribution patterns. Subsequently, we present the German Internet Panel (GIP) survey data and our approach to measure voters' satisfaction with government's policy priorities across twenty policy areas at the individual level. We discuss our empirical findings and conclude the paper with final remarks.

## 2. Responsibility attribution in coalitions: overview

Empirical studies on electoral accountability have provided vast evidence for the strong relationship between past (economic) performance and incumbent support (Fiorina, 1981; Duch and Stevenson, 2008; Powell and Whitten, 1993; Cutler, 2004; Canes-Wrone et al., 2011; Fisher and Hobolt, 2010; Hobolt et al., 2013). At the same time, studies have shown that performance voting is weaker in complex institutional settings with blurred lines of responsibility (Anderson, 1995a, 1995b; 2000; Duch and Stevenson, 2005; Dorussen and Taylor, 2001; Hobolt et al., 2013; Lewis-Beck, 1990; Nadeau et al., 2002; Powell, 2000; Powell and Whitten, 1993; Whitten and Palmer, 1999). A frequent assumption of this literature is that voters hold coalition partners equally responsible, reflected in the common approach to consider the aggregate vote share of all government parties (see e.g. Powell and Whitten, 1993; Hobolt et al., 2013; Duch and Stevenson, 2008: 57–59; Tilley et al., 2008). Others assume that voters hold the dominant party in government responsible (Royed et al., 2000) and usually investigate the impact of (economic) policy performance on voting for the party of the chief executive or the Prime Minister (Anderson, 2000; Duch and Stevenson, 2006, 2008). The motivation for this assumption is that, besides being the largest party in government, the party of the chief executive or the Prime Minister often controls the ministry in charge of the economy or finance. However, by focusing only on one policy area, namely the economy, it is difficult to disentangle the impact of ministerial portfolios, party size and the prime minister status on voters' responsibility attribution decisions more generally.

Recent experimental studies have addressed the actual responsibility attribution patterns in the presence of coalition governments. Duch et al. (2015) use laboratory experiments to analyze how individuals assign responsibility for collective decisions in social, economic and political settings. Their study reveals that individuals predominantly rely on proposal power and/or size (vote share) as heuristics when they assign responsibility for collective decisions reached by majority rule. While there is a strong

interaction effect between proposal power and size, which manifests in concentrating responsibility on the decision maker with proposal and plurality status, Duch et al. (2015) also find that proposal power and size have independent effects. In particular, actors with proposal power are also punished for collective decisions even when they are not the largest ones.<sup>1</sup>

The experimental results suggest that in the context of coalition governments voters should hold the coalition party with proposal power and/or with the largest seat share responsible. As proposal power within government is formally and practically granted to the party of the minister (Laver and Shepsle, 1996), voters should hold coalition parties responsible for the policy areas under their ministerial control. At the same time, given that size also matters, voters are also expected to hold the largest party responsible. While there is scarce empirical evidence which of these findings hold outside of the experimental setting, Duch and Stevenson (2013) find in a study on electoral accountability in the UK that proposal power is indeed a central aspect for responsibility attribution in economic affairs. Their analysis reveals that survey participants who value proposal power when attributing responsibility are more likely to reward and punish the coalition party in control of the economy ministry for perceived economic ups and downs. In contrast, the coalition partner without proposal power in economic policy is not held accountable for economic developments. However, because the study of Duch and Stevenson (2013) covers only the economic policy area, which is managed by the largest party in government with a prime ministerial post, it remains an open question whether ministerial proposal power, size, or prime minister prerogatives are important for responsibility attribution decisions.

Theoretically, the decisions in coalition governments need the support of each of the coalition parties to gather the required parliamentary majority and successfully pass government bills. Therefore, unless coalition governments are oversized or have the support of opposition parties in parliament, coalition parties make collective decisions unanimously. Such veto power substantially reduces the power of the proposer (Tsebelis, 2002) and even the smallest party without proposal power can block undesired policies. Furthermore, government bills are frequently amended in parliament, further limiting the ultimate influence of the proposer in government (see e.g. Martin and Vanberg, 2014). As a consequence, proposal power and size might be less important when voters assign responsibility and rate coalition parties.

Recent work has therefore highlighted the central role of policy compromise in coalition governments (Martin and Vanberg, 2011, 2014). Although coalition parties may have position taking incentives, repeated interactions between coalition partners incentivize them to reach compromises, which they try to ensure through various control and oversight mechanisms in government and parliament (Thies, 2001; Martin and Vanberg, 2011). In support of this conjecture, Martin and Vanberg (2014) find that coalition decisions indeed reflect a compromise between the coalition parties. Given that coalition governance is inconceivable without mutual policy accommodation (Martin and Vanberg, 2011), voters' perceptions of coalition policy compromises might play a significant role when they assign policy responsibility among the coalition partners. The remainder of this study explicitly focuses on collective decisions in coalitions and incorporates central aspects of

<sup>1</sup> In 88% of the cases when experiment participants punished only the agenda setter, the agenda setter was not the largest or the majority actor in the collective decision making body. Similarly, the largest actors were punished for collective decisions even when they did not have proposal power (Duch et al., 2015, p.377).

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